WHERE IS THE LIE?

The Home Video History of 1979's THE DARK

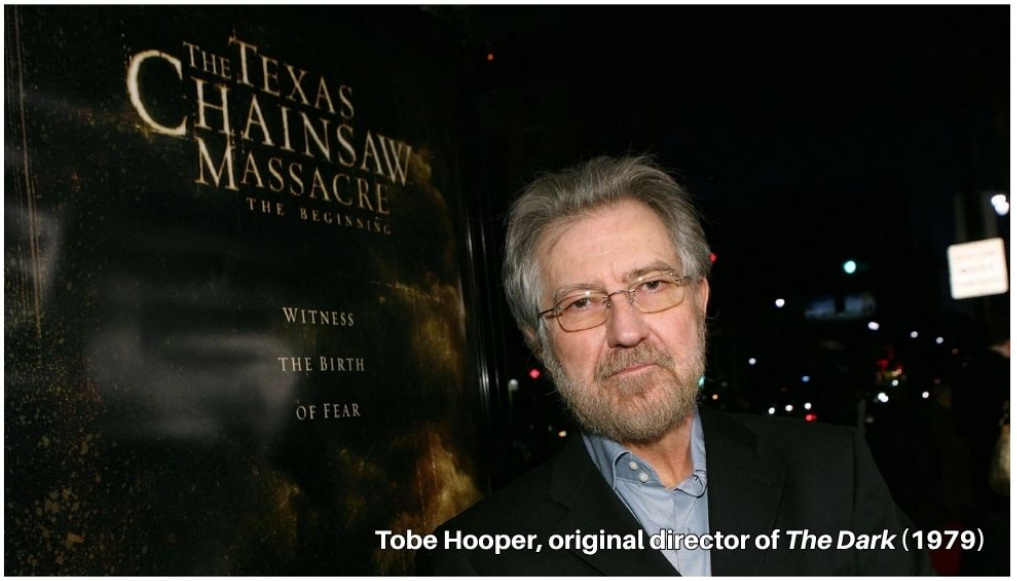
by Julius Banzon

This is a public service announcement camouflaged as an article. If anyone has any connections to William Devane, Cathy Lee Crosby, or Phillip Michael Thomas, please tell them there is a man in California who is looking for them. It is a matter of public concern – the public in my head.

The reason behind such desperation is the incomplete, in more ways than one, nature of the home media releases for this film. Deserved? Perhaps, according to most everyone who's watched the film. Devoid of public interest? Undoubtedly. But I am a person, am I not? Do I not bleed? And I bleed for this film. I am doing so figuratively as I write this piece. That said, this film has not been treated too badly by its home video company custodians. It was first released on DVD in 2005 from Media Blasters' subdivision Shriek Show, with the wherewithal to have tracked down director John 'Bud' Cardos to provide a commentary track. Igo Kantor (associate producer on *The Dark*) would resurface in 2010 for Shout Factory's release of a film he clearly treats like the favorite son, compared to the unwanted attic child that is the follow-up we concern ourselves with, *Kingdom of the Spiders* (his partnership with Cardos as director there directly leading to Cardos's involvement with *The Dark*), both men in their golden years more than happy to lend their commentary on their long careers and cowboy days; fortuitously this lined up with the niche media frontier of the 2000s and 2010s, and before 2020 and the age of COVID and Trump, when society turned inward into itself for the sake of public health (and political sanity). Cardos even had a book written about him that focused on his storied career as a stuntman and teamster, concurrent with his directing career – truly a multivalent personality. In 2017, Ronin Flix stunned me by announcing a

William Devane

Blu-Ray edition that would include a NEWLY RECORDED, second commentary that would join Kantor and Cardos in one room . . . moderated by some wacky B-movie expert equivalents of stunt casting, including filmmaking wunderkind and maleficent influence on the industry/Hollywood wastrel Damon Packard. I was intrigued until I wasn't, listening to it and having all the same suspicions. It also included a spotlight on composer Richard Kellaway, with an all-new interview and an isolated music track, because . . . he deserves it. Hell yeah! It was rounded out by a new on-camera interview with Cardos, ever the people-pleaser. Finally, the film got a Blu-Ray release in 2021 by MVD Rewind releases, with the same extras, and while it could have fixed apparent flaws (to be discussed shortly), I doubt anyone was giving it the care to do so, and I suspect it is essentially the same release as the Code Red version. Apparently, it still includes a Code Red logo at the beginning, something that always amuses me greatly (seeing other companies' logos reproduced free-floating on cheapo releases – one of the great pleasures of watching old, public domain "multi-film collection"



Tobe Hooper, original director of *The Dark* (1979)

DVD sets [Correction 3/27/26: Apparently MVD Rewind is an affiliated, superseding label of the now mostly defunct Code Red]).

It wasn't all the stops, but it was something, albeit more like a beaten-up soapbox for old, ousted Roman statesmen who still had an agenda, despite their time having passed, to spout off their canned self-mythologizing. But far be it for anyone with something honest to say about the infamous directorial ousting of filmmaker Tobe Hooper from the film after three or four (it alters with the storyteller) days of shooting to come forward for this release. Or anyone who could rightly condemn the notorious post-production interference by Edward Montoro that changed the genre of the film from supernatural thriller to science fiction film, leading to a concerted reshoot of the climax and less concerted tinkering with half-baked (not even half – a quarter-baked!) optical imagery, which even Cardos hems about it really throwing a wrench into his plans, gee whiz. All that could be forgiven, or tolerated, if not for the opportunity for a true "re-evaluation" (so my deluded heart wishes – but more realistically, a post-Vinegar Syndrome "Oh shit, they spent money on <u>that</u>?" re-channeling of one's "good taste"-driven, nose-thumbing self-respect) being still in the cards. This is because, and I am not sure what happened in the Code Red transfer – a "2K transfer from the original camera negative" – but a high number of cuts in the film are accompanied by weird, seemingly digital shakes, or flutters in the placement of the frame for a single 1/23.976 second often following a cut, many consistently occurring at chapter breaks (though not reserved to them). My recut of the film made in recent years cuts out every single one of these (uniform) aberrances. That's not just a labor of love, that's a labor of paid commission (unfulfilled)! [Ed.: Upon

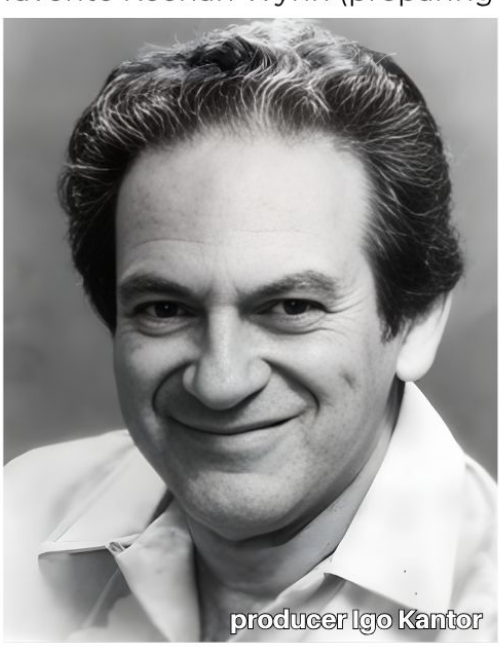
John "Bud" Cardos

second inspection, I am no longer sure I did any fixing of the sort, perhaps reticent I was to eliminate precious fractions of seconds of the film. And is it possible these flutters are a part of the careless regard of the original material itself by its contemporaneous producers? No, I don't think so, as the transfer feels so compromised in glitches of a digitized, pixellated variety. 3/27/26] But really, anything that has any involvement and participation by *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* auteur Tobe Hooper has to have some degree of historical artistic value deserving of such basic clean-up, and Hooper was not uninvolved (despite the aspersions cast against him for his participation shooting, to be derided and - according to claims - discarded), in much the same way Edgar Wright was not uninvolved in the genesis of *Ant-Man* (2015), or Spielberg in the genesis of *Interstellar* (2014) (that's an interesting one). *The Dark*'s general reception may very well have some founding in the antipathy towards any sort of intellectual rigor found in genre products, a tendency in the regard towards many of Hooper's own efforts, which *The Dark* resembles mostly in its strange reticence to offer proper satisfactions as a genre film, but rather as a strange artifact that combines B-genre with Fritz Lang-like rejoinders to society at large; not satires or ripostes, but mimetically opalescent reflections that appear most often on screen as monstrous violence and undercurrents of existentialism.

Vivian Blaine

The story behind the production of Cardos's *The Dark* is an unfortunate one, although probably less fodder for conspiracies than I may want to believe. Written by Stanford Whitmore, a would-be novelist and stalwart of 60's liberalism in movies, but ultimately in TV, he wrote it "on spec" for friend Bill Butler (cinematographer of Spielberg's Jaws [1975]), who wanted to make something – perhaps a directing debut? – with dark hues and requiring rich, luminescent night photography (what better than an urban monster movie where the creature only comes out at night?). Well, the script ended up in the hands of Dick Clark's cinema production company, who partnered with previously-mentioned infamous, "disappeared" film producer Edward L. Montoro's Film Ventures International, which reached its enterprising peak a year prior with the success of the *Jaws* rip-off *Grizzly* (made by William Girdler). By this time, Bill Butler was no longer in the picture, too busy being an in-demand cinematographer.

In 1977, likely the same time film director Tobe Hooper had a development deal with Universal Pictures (under the tutelage of William Friedkin), Montoro and Clark would secure Hooper's interest in the project and hire him on. He would prepare the film for three months, from August to October of 1977, before shooting would commence in November. A week at most in, he would be fired and replaced by his 1st assistant director, John Cardos, who had helmed *Kingdom of the Spiders* for Kantor the previous year, and was, it can be said, a known quantity. The cast would be made up of 70's mainstream faces, like Cathy Lee Crosby and (likely having to do with Dick Clark's involvement) famed radio personality Casey Kasem in a small but memorable role. This was somehow not a small affair – respected Hollywood veterans like Richard Jaeckel, Biff Elliott, perennial favorite Keenan Wynn (preparing


producer Igo Kantor

dick clark productions

Jacquelyn Hyde and Richard Jaeckel in *The Dark* (1979)

soon to battle evil munching fish in *Piranha*), Warren Kemmerling (only just about a year out from *Close Encounters* (!)), and Vivian Blaine (who had risen to fame for her performance as Adelaide in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's film adaptation of Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls* [1957]) herself would be involved, while counter-culture actor William Devane, who had reportedly signed on because of Hooper's participation, and the clearest "Hooper-style" casting choice (he loves his offbeat male presences), was cast in the leading role. Devane was the most upset after Hooper left; though, I would like to think America's Wonder Woman Cathy Crosby has no ill words to say of Hooper either – perhaps even an enthusiastic one or two? (Please get in contact with me, Ms. Crosby! Anyone associated with the Disc-Connected channel will know how to reach me!)

So, now to the matter of the stories that surround the film's shooting and proclaimed in the sole widely-disseminated commentary (the one between both Kantor and Cardos, with Damon Packard) and endorsed history-making around the film, for DVD/Blu-Ray commentaries do have a special power, and hold a special weight in determining what the "on-the-record" story of a film is. It is why we value them so much – nothing is more powerful and accessible than hearing it come straight from the mouth of someone involved. And yes, this can be used for Evil; like wiping off Hooper's name from their lips and *The Dark*'s identity like a bad taste from bitter fruit. But to the facts of the matter: Hooper himself states he only shot four days. Accounts vary, though, as to the current existence of this footage, the capability behind Hooper's contributions, and the reasons behind his firing. This is not (necessarily, at least in regards to the latter two points) because of some great, malefic design to obfuscate the truth by Kantor, but because these things don't really matter to producers who are there merely to turn out a product and make a profit from it. If a film has two authors, one an irrepressible layman stylist (Cardos), the other a deeply conceptual artist (Hooper), then so what? As long as the film is finished and can be touted as a decent hit, and it has been said that *The Dark* made "OK money" for the company at the box office, the details are unimportant; the existence of a deep-seated artistry in the margins of their profitable sci-fi/horror tentpole film is completely incidental and not worth studying or finding the truth. This is ultimately about the two now-digitally-cemented purveyors of *The Dark*'s eternal history, Igo Kantor and John Cardos; the former, who holds court on the Blu-Ray commentar(ies) like the king he was, and

The infamous phone booth scene, filmed on tha day that director Tobe Hooper was dismissed from the project.

both together, whose stories regarding the film . . . differ, change, and morph over the three decades before the advent of recorded commentaries and, most tellingly, between the two commentaries given almost a decade apart.

In the most recent 2017 commentary track on the Ronan Flix/Code Red Blu-ray, Kantor is eager to weave an incredibly tangled story about Hooper sneaking off during lunch breaks, going to nearby clinics to obtain medication for an undisclosed health condition, and returning to set in a daze. (Further analysis suggests that Kantor may not even have been on the set at that time - an interview with Kantor suggests he wasn't called in until Cardos had assumed the role of Hooper's replacement! Suusspiciouss . . .)

The respectful Cardos, who was by all means a nice guy and a committed craftsman, loyal to his profession's most weary soldiers (up to a point), essentially murmurs assent of Kantor's account. Hooper's version of events is quite different, naturally. His version involves having "in four days . . . at least five major arguments," and he

declares "not wanting to be a traffic cop . . ." What we hear from crew members and second-hand accounts of events on the set is telling. The day Hooper was fired involved a scene in a phone booth, a sequence which takes up less than 30 seconds in the film, and Hooper's having "[taken] two days" to shoot it. (This is according to an FVI advertising team member, who was hired just after *The Dark* was released, and so experienced none of that saga, but still managed to hear this story in the corridors of FVI's white plaster wall environs). This is certainly the agreed-upon take by crew, Kantor, and Cardos himself, who likes to repeat the catchy statement that Hooper fell a week short of schedule by the time he was formally let go. The time he took directing was the reason. I guess the medication stupors were merely an incident of note. Never mind Hooper talking about seeing Cardos, out of the corner of his eye, "studying the script . . ." and concluding: "I knew what he was thinking . . ."

Kantor, in an interview with Fangoria circa the release of FVI's 1984 release *Mutant*, states about *The Dark*: "We were rewriting every night for the following day of shooting . . . whereas *Kingdom of the Spiders* was a well-constructed, tightly-knit script, *The Dark* was a hodgepodge. A lot of it was fixed in editing; there were continuity problems [and] scenes that didn't make any sense. Another problem was that we couldn't use any material that Hooper had shot because that was against Directors Guild regulations. Bud had to go back and start from scratch."

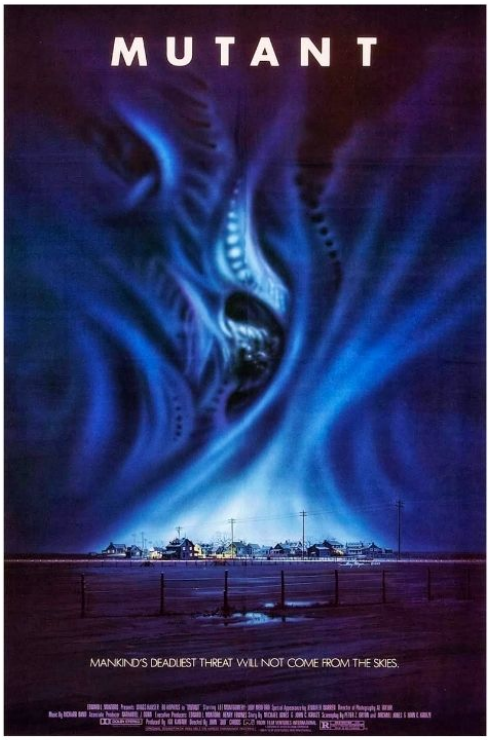
You may take to heart some of his pointed critique if you've seen the film, but as someone who has

Jay Lawrence, Cathy Lee Crosby, Keenan Wynn, and an unidentified day player in *The Dark* (1979)

has read the final shooting script of the film going into production (and has seen the film), I can tell you a lot of what is relayed in the above quote is pure fantasy (or misremembering), or doesn't make any sense.

Cardos is clear that "[he] directed everything," despite the travails of having had no prep time.

The real galling part about these commentaries is that, well, the story changes. No mention of the pill-popping in the 2005 commentary, but suddenly the aspersions grow twofold now that they – I speak, perhaps a bit unfairly, in a collective sense – have had some time to think. Now, there's no reason for these producers to need to show respect or courtesy to a man they worked only a few weeks with before severing ties less than amicably, but there's no reason to try to intellectualize it either, which Kantor briskly proceeds to do: Kantor is quick to mention *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, a film whose production is prone to exaggeration, and uses that as a cudgel, because if one can weaponize a masterpiece against its creator, anything is possible for the huckster, isn't it? Kantor makes the claims that Hooper was so used to working independently and with a small crew that he was unsuited to take on a project of this size. While this claim has some validity and would surely make its way into the brain rot of people who want to claim Hooper also did not direct Steven Spielberg's production of *Poltergeist* (after having directed two formidable studio-adjacent works in the meantime), Kantor the producer stakes his claim on specious "urban legend"-style



"click-bait" "facts." Surely yes, *The Dark* would have been Hooper's cross-over into full-blown high-budget filmmaking, but Kantor and Cardos both go on to insist on the (false) preconception that *Texas Chain Saw* was filmed "over two years, off-and-on, on weekends," which is, of course, verifiably false – absurd, even, on a pure, bare-faced level – and now forever recorded on magnetic tape. I, for one, see only weak justifications for an outfit that sees fit to care only about easy filmmaking and the bottom line – yes, common, but in Kantor's case, a serial offense, or a so-called "method" that was actually some sort of covert labor mill. They would pull the same stunt of switching up a director's plans after months of pre-pro-duction when they took another fledgling (but now experienced) filmmaker, Mark Rosman, unceremoniously off of the aforementioned *Night Shadows*, later re-named *Mutant*.

Oh, their ignorance of Hooper's historical productions is not the only thing that changes between 2005 and 2017. In the 2017 commentary, Kantor states, "Very little of Hooper's footage was used," whereas in 2005 Cardos stated, unequivocally, "None of it was used" (I remind the reader also of Kantor's quote above, given in the 80's, about Director's Guild regulations, where he states that no footage of Hooper's was used). In other words: Hooper's footage was used. A very trustworthy internet statement circulated around the time of Hooper's passing stating that Hooper, upon watching the finished film – albeit years after its release – had expressed "shock" at "how much" of his footage was used, and that he regretted not putting a case to the DGA.

So - without coming down on the character of anyone, and these are all, mournfully, players no longer with us - what is on record can be just as easily un-

done on record. That is the magic of commentary – it can hold so much aura, but that aura can be complete BS at the same time. The internecine fun of teasing out on the internet the veracity and nuance of statements millions of people can literally hear for themselves – recent "fun times" on Twitter include David Fincher's story of halting production on *Gone Girl* to cater to Ben Affleck's team-sports-related tantrum (*but did he relay it jokingly?*) and resulting in reams of takes on Affleck's character and Fincher's wastefulness – has gotten more viral potential (since COVID, but now more so since AI, creating faked soundbytes just as fast as we can curate manually our m(e)metic information [3/27/26 -Ed.]), for better or worse, from online news sites that will publish a headline based on these recordings almost immediately after hearing that one "tidbit" or interpretively potentiated "bomb drop" that they know will generate clicks. It is the power of the Saussurian utterance in the realm of media preservation. I am glad Cardos and Kantor – who both passed away in the last six years, the sad years (of the gradual rise of fascism and austerity, not that Obama wasn't also bombing Middle Eastern nations during his term [3/27/26 -Ed.]) got their time to claim the immortality that making *The Dark* earns them. There is at least one person in the world who will feel a shiver (whether gratefulness, aversion, or a mixture of both) every time they put their commentary on. But maybe the time has come for more of those involved to understand what they have done for the world. And for Cathy Lee Crosby, WIliam Devane, and Phillip Michael Thomas to pay the same respects themselves by talking about it in their own full-blown commentaries.

Long live *The Dark*. Let's right some wrongs, aerate some lies, and get that transfer just right.

***The Dark* (1979)**